The Price of Everything

A Story of Making Ends Meet in Michigan

Karen Mitchell pulled into the Meijer parking lot in Grand Rapids, killed the engine of her 2014 Ford Escape, and just sat there for a moment. She could see other women doing the same thing—gripping their steering wheels, staring at the store entrance like it was a dentist's office.

She pulled out her phone and opened the note she'd been updating all week.

Milk — $4.29 (Kroger) / $3.89 (Meijer) / $3.49 (Aldi — limit 2)
Eggs — $5.49/dozen (what???)
Ground beef — $6.99/lb
Butter — $5.79

She scrolled down to the bottom where she'd written, in all caps: BUDGET $120 FOR THE WEEK. MAKE IT WORK.

Her phone buzzed. A text from her husband, Dave.

"How bad is it going to be?"

She typed back: *"Bad."*

Dave Mitchell was sitting in the break room at the furniture warehouse where he worked as a logistics supervisor, eating a sandwich he'd packed from home—leftover chicken, no cheese, because cheese had become a luxury item. He was forty-three years old, and until about two years ago, he'd never once looked at a grocery receipt in his life. Now he studied them like they were financial reports.

When he and Karen had bought their house in Wyoming, Michigan, just south of Grand Rapids, in 2019, things had felt stable. His salary was $62,000. Karen made $38,000 working part-time as a dental hygienist while raising their two kids—Tyler, now twelve, and Sophie, now nine. The mortgage was $1,450. Not cheap, but manageable. They had a little savings. They went out to eat once, maybe twice a week. The kids did soccer and dance without anyone crunching numbers.

Then everything started climbing.

It wasn't just one thing. It was the groceries, yes—but it was also the property taxes going up because home values had skyrocketed. It was the homeowners insurance doubling after the 2022 storms. It was car insurance up thirty percent because Michigan's rates were already the highest in the country and somehow kept finding new

ceilings. It was DTE Energy sending bills that made Dave physically ill—$340 in January for a house they kept at sixty-six degrees.

But the groceries were the thing that landed in their kitchen every week, the thing Karen had to face head-on, aisle by aisle, and it had become a kind of slow-motion crisis that neither of them quite knew how to talk about anymore without it turning into an argument.

Karen grabbed a cart. The right front wheel squeaked, which felt appropriate.

She started in produce, which used to be the easy section. Bananas were still reasonable—fifty-nine cents a pound—but everything else made her pause. Bell peppers were $1.79 each. A bag of grapes was $5.99. She picked up a pint of strawberries, looked at the $4.49 price tag, and put them in the cart anyway, because Sophie loved strawberries and Sophie was nine and the world was already hard enough.

She took them back out.

She put them back in.

She took them out again and kept walking.

In the dairy aisle, she stood in front of the milk for a full minute. Two gallons a week for the family—that used to be maybe $5.50 total. Now it was closer to $8. She grabbed two gallons of the store brand. She looked at the organic milk the kids used to drink and kept walking.

Eggs. She just stared. The cheap ones—the ones in the styrofoam carton that practically fell apart—were $4.99. The cage-free ones she used to buy without thinking were $6.49. She picked up the cheap ones and tried not to think about the chickens.

At the meat counter, she stopped breathing for a second. Ground beef was $7.49 a pound here. Boneless chicken breasts were $5.99. Pork chops were $4.99. She had a moment where she mentally calculated how much of their weekly budget would go to protein alone and felt that familiar tightness in her chest.

She picked up a family pack of chicken thighs instead—$2.99 a pound. Dark meat. She'd learned to cook it a hundred different ways.

She did not go down the cereal aisle, because cereal had become a racket. Seven, eight, nine dollars for a box that was mostly air. She'd started buying the big bag of oats from Aldi instead. Oatmeal every morning. Tyler had complained for two weeks and then stopped complaining, which was somehow worse.

She skipped the snack aisle entirely.

She put back the peanut butter she usually bought and got the store brand.

She picked up a bag of rice. Put it back. Picked it up again. Rice was still cheap, at least. Rice and beans and chicken thighs. She was running a 2019 household on 2024 prices, and something had to give every single time.

At the checkout, she watched the screen climb. $58. $73. $91. $104. $118.

The total came to $127.34.

Over budget. Again.

She pulled out a bag of apples—$6.99—and told the cashier to take it off. The cashier didn't blink. She'd been doing this all day, every day, for people who looked exactly like Karen.

$120.35. Close enough.

Karen drove home and sat in the driveway for a second before unloading the bags.

Dave got home at 5:45. He came through the back door into the kitchen, where Karen was putting groceries away. He could tell by the set of her shoulders how the trip had gone.

"How bad?" he asked.

"A hundred twenty."

"For what? That doesn't look like—"

"For a week, Dave. That's a week. And I didn't buy cereal. I didn't buy snacks. I didn't buy the strawberries. I bought chicken thighs instead of breasts. I bought store-brand everything. I skipped half the store. And it was still a hundred twenty dollars."

He set his lunch container on the counter. "What about the stuff we need for Tyler's—"

"I know about Tyler's project. I'll figure it out."

"I'm just asking—"

"I know you're just asking. I'm telling you I'll figure it out."

The silence had a weight to it. Sophie came running in from the living room. "Mom! Can we get pizza on Friday? It's early release day and Madison's family is getting—"

"Pizza's really expensive right now, baby."

"Madison said they're getting Domino's—"

"Sophie. Not right now."

Sophie's face crumpled, and she went back to the living room. Karen pressed her palms flat on the counter and closed her eyes.

"I'll make pizza," she said quietly. "I'll make it from scratch. It's flour and yeast and some sauce and cheese. I can do that."

Dave nodded. "I can pick up the flour."

"We have flour. I bought a big bag at Aldi last month."

Another silence, but softer this time.

He started helping her put things away. He held up the chicken thighs. "These are good. We can do the sheet pan thing with the potatoes."

"I got potatoes. They were cheap. Well. Cheaper."

They moved around each other in the kitchen the way married people do after fourteen years—wordless handoffs, automatic adjustments, someone opening a cabinet while the other reaches for it. They'd gotten good at the logistics of survival. It was the emotional part that kept catching them.

That night, after the kids were in bed, Dave sat at the kitchen table with his laptop. Karen was on the couch with hers, looking at Facebook marketplace for winter coats for Sophie because the one from last year was too small and a new one at Target was $45.

"Karen."

"Hm."

"I ran the numbers again. If I pick up a Saturday shift at the warehouse—just one a month—they pay time-and-a-half. That's about—"

"Three hundred bucks."

"After taxes, yeah. Maybe two-sixty."

"Two-sixty covers about two weeks of groceries. If we're careful."

"I know it's not a solution. It's just—"

"It's something. Yeah. Do it."

She didn't look up from her screen, but he could see her jaw working. He knew what she was thinking because he was thinking it too: they were both working, they were both careful, they were doing everything right, and they were still falling behind. Not dramatically, not the kind of behind that shows up as a foreclosure notice or a shut-off warning—just the slow erosion, the constant arithmetic, the feeling that every single purchase was now a decision.

"I talked to Marcus at work," Dave said. "He's been going to the food pantry at his church. Says there's no shame in it. They get surplus from—"

"We don't need a food pantry, Dave."

"I know. I'm just saying. He said a lot of people are—"

"We don't need a food pantry."

The firmness in her voice wasn't pride, exactly. It was something more fragile than that—the idea that if they crossed that line, it meant something had changed about who they were, and she wasn't ready for that.

"I know," Dave said. "I was just mentioning it."

She softened. "I know. I'm sorry."

He closed the laptop and came over to the couch. He sat down next to her and she leaned into him the way she used to when they were dating, when they were broke in a different way—young broke, optimistic broke, the kind of broke that felt temporary.

"I hate this," she said.

"I know."

"I'm so tired of calculating. I'm tired of putting things back. I'm tired of telling the kids no. I'm tired of staring at receipts like they're—"

"I know."

"Do you remember when we used to just... go to the store? And just... buy things?"

"I remember."

"What happened to us?"

It wasn't really a question. They both knew what had happened. Inflation. Supply chains. Gouging. The price of everything going up while their paychecks stayed the same, and every economist on the news saying it was getting better while the register at Meijer told a different story.

"Nothing happened to us," Dave said. "We're the same people. We're just playing a harder game."

"That doesn't make me feel better."

"I know. It's not supposed to make you feel better. It's just supposed to be true."

Saturday morning, Dave drove to Aldi on 28th Street. He'd started going on his own, separate trips, to supplement what Karen bought at Meijer. They'd turned grocery shopping into a two-front operation, dividing and conquering, comparing prices on their phones like they were running a small business.

Which, in a way, they were.

He pushed his quarter into the cart and went in. Aldi was smaller, cheaper, no-frills—and somehow that made it easier. There were fewer choices, which meant fewer decisions, which meant less emotional tax. He didn't have to stand in front of forty kinds of cereal and feel the weight of capitalism on his shoulders. There were four kinds. He picked one.

He bought oats. Rice. Canned black beans. Frozen vegetables. A block of cheddar that was two dollars cheaper than the Meijer equivalent. Pasta—store brand, eighty-nine cents a box. Pasta sauce in a jar for $1.79.

He got to the register and the total was $43.

Forty-three dollars for a cart that was genuinely full. He almost laughed.

On the way home, he drove past a gas station. Regular unleaded: $3.49. In Mississippi, it was probably $2.80. In Michigan, everything cost more—the gas, the insurance, the taxes, the electricity. People on the coasts thought of the Midwest as cheap, and maybe it was, compared to California or New York. But Michigan wages hadn't kept up with Michigan prices, and that gap was where families like the Mitchells lived.

He stopped at a red light and looked at the car next to him. A woman about Karen's age, driving a minivan, looked exhausted. She had a Meijer bag in the passenger seat. Their eyes met for a second, and something passed between them—a recognition, a shared exhaustion.

The light turned green.

Sunday dinner had always been a thing in the Mitchell house. Not fancy, but consistent—a real meal, all four of them at the table, phones away. Karen had fought for this tradition, and she wasn't about to let grocery prices kill it.

This Sunday, she made roasted chicken thighs with potatoes and carrots. A salad with the cheapest greens she could find. A loaf of bread from the bread maker Dave's mom had given them years ago—the one they'd used twice and then shelved, which was now, suddenly, one of their most valuable possessions.

Tyler ate three pieces of chicken. Sophie had seconds of the bread.

"This is really good, Mom," Tyler said, and Karen almost cried, which startled her. It was just chicken. It was just bread. But the fact that it was good, and cheap, and made with her hands, and her kid noticed—all of it hit at once.

"Thank you, baby."

"Can I have more bread?"

"There's plenty."

Dave caught her eye across the table and gave her a small nod. She nodded back.

After dinner, after dishes, after homework, after bedtime, Dave sat at the kitchen table one more time. He opened his laptop and went to the budget spreadsheet he'd built. He stared at it for a while. Then he added a new column at the end and labeled it: THINGS WE STILL HAVE.

He typed:

- House (ours, 3 bed, 2 bath, the one with the maple tree Tyler climbed when he was six)
- Two kids who eat too much and are healthy
- Karen's cooking (seriously underrated)
- The bread maker (thanks, Mom)
- Two jobs that haven't laid us off (yet)
- Each other (corny but true)

He saved the file and closed the laptop.

The next morning, Monday, Karen was back at the dental office, cleaning teeth, making $24 an hour, thinking about the electric bill. Dave was at the warehouse, moving furniture, thinking about the Saturday shift. Tyler was at school, thinking about a video game he wanted. Sophie was at school, thinking about pizza.

And somewhere in Michigan—in Grand Rapids and Flint and Detroit and Kalamazoo and Marquette and every small town in between—mill of other families were doing the exact same thing: sitting at kitchen tables, staring at receipts, doing the math, putting things back, making it work, making it work, making it work.

Not because they were heroes. Not because it was noble. But because there was no alternative, and because somewhere in the middle of all the calculating, there was still chicken and bread and a table with four chairs and people you loved sitting in them.

It wasn't enough. But it was what they had.

And on a Tuesday night in November, in a house in Wyoming, Michigan, with the heat set to sixty-six and the leaves falling off the maple tree, it would have to do.

Karen would go back to Meijer on Thursday. She'd bring $80. She'd make it work.